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## A FORGOTTEN FACTOR OF REVELATION

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The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews says: "God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in his Son." That God has spoken unto men in his Son all Christians admit. But that God has spoken to men *πολυμερῶς*, "in manifold ways," and *πολυτρόπως*, "in many modes," some doubt and some deny. They forget, apparently, that all language is symbolic, and consists of sounds or signs, which appeal to the ear or the eye or the touch, and which are interpreted by the spirit which dwells beneath the physical sense.

The Scriptures clearly affirm that "God has spoken" to men and made himself known. In his self-revelation God condescended to use the means and methods adapted at every stage to the customs and conceptions of men, even to the extent of making the invisible, divine nature visible in the person of a Son in whose tears and tones and touch men saw and felt the tenderness and throb and thrill of the infinite love of God.

Accepting the fact that "God hath spoken" to men, we must recognize the underlying fact that any revelation of God must condescend to the nature and conform to the mental conceptions of man at the period when the revelation is given. This, to a large extent, is a forgotten factor of revelation. But in all teaching whereby what lies in the mind of one person is revealed or communicated to the mind of another person, the method of communication is determined, not by the character and knowledge and greatness of the teacher, but by the character and ignorance and need of the pupil. This is a primal principle of pedagogy. Every teacher of science or mathematics or music or morals must use a language and must choose illustrations familiar to the mind of the pupil. Music could never be revealed or made intelligible to an unmusical nature, and God could never be

revealed to an unspiritual man; but the method of revelation and of instruction in each case is determined, not by the higher nature of the teacher or of God, but by the lower nature of the pupil or of man. This fact is abundantly recognized in the Scriptures. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, to whom the gospel had come while they were filled with their Greek conceptions, and said of his method: "Brethren, I could not speak unto you as unto spiritual but as unto carnal, as unto babes in Christ. I fed you with milk, not with meat; for ye were not able to bear it." It was their carnality which limited the spirituality of his teachings and made it necessary for him to give them the milk of the gospel, and to illustrate it by quotations from their own poets and by resemblances in their own national games. Jesus spoke to the multitudes in parables, because they having eyes saw not and having ears heard not the inner spiritual truth of the kingdom of heaven. They could see only the semblances of the truth in the material and social forms in which Jesus portrayed it in the pictures of his parables. Jesus interpreted certain parables to the disciples, because to them he could say: "Unto you it is given to know the mysteries, the spiritual facts themselves of the kingdom of heaven." And he added: "Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear." By this he meant that their inner eye saw and their inner ear heard the actual things of the kingdom of heaven. But even to these disciples, who constituted the senior class in divine knowledge, Jesus said: "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now." Their spiritual weakness limited both the amount and the quality of his revelation. Jesus, in commenting upon the teachings of the past, said that Moses suffered men to put away their wives because of the hardness of their hearts. That is to say, the conceptions and the customs of their times made it impossible for Moses to enact a law of marriage coincident with the divine ideal. Because of the morals of his times, Moses could enact a law which would eliminate only the grosser evils and secure relative justice. It is noticeable, in all these cases, that the form of moral legislation and the method of revealing spiritual truth were determined by the morals and the spiritual conceptions of the times. Because of this essential principle of revelation, God gave men a "law having a shadow of good things to come, not the very

image of the things." For this reason, God finally spoke "in his Son," who is "the effulgence of his glory and the very image of his substance." And so complete is this final revelation that Jesus has said: "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father."

This principle of revelation has an important bearing on the interpretation of biblical history and the use of religious ritual. There are two extreme classes; namely, those who claim that what was once a method of divine revelation or a useful religious ritual should always be a method of revelation or a useful ritual, and, on the other hand, there are those who claim that what is not now a method of revelation or a useful ritual could never have been such method or such ritual. To the former class belong such as the Christian Jews of the first century, who held that, unless the Gentiles kept the law of Moses, they could not be saved; and also such as now claim that, if "Jesus was approved of God by mighty works and wonders and signs which God did by him" then, his disciples and ministers ought now to be so approved. To the latter class belong such as think that a ritual which has no value now—such as circumcision or sacrifice—could never have had divine sanction or have rendered special service; and also such as claim that, if God does not now work signs and wonders in America, he did not work "signs and wonders in the land of Egypt." The former class demand physical manifestations of divine power now, and stand ready to regard the wonder-workers who may heal disease—as apparently some do—as accredited religious teachers. The latter class demand only moral manifestations of spiritual power, and tend to doubt or deny what is called the miraculous element in the biblical record. For instance, the early settlers of New Haven, Connecticut, had so little conception of any progressive element in divine revelation that, omitting simply the ceremonial law of Israel, they attempted to establish, morally, a sort of Hebrew colony, and enacted laws giving chapter and verse from the Pentateuch as their divine sanction. Some of the descendants of these settlers have apparently so little conception of the progressive method of revelation determined by the needs of men that they doubt or deny the divine element in the ancient biblical record and regard Old Testament history as a hindrance to Christianity.

Spiritual truth is likely to lie between extreme views. Both classes

mentioned above ignore the primal principle of pedagogy which is recognized throughout the Scriptures.

Israel was not an isolated people to be studied alone, as men once thought, but part of the Semitic race. Their conceptions and customs, as we now know from Assyrian and Babylonian records which have been exhumed, were similar to the conceptions and customs of kindred people. To the Assyrians, for instance, "their enemies were the enemies of Asshur," and "all wars and cruelties were ascribed to his command." The laws of Hammurabi have much in common with the laws of Moses. These facts should be borne in mind.

The Israelites were a religious, imaginative, dramatic people. If a thunderstorm occurred during a battle and the enemy was defeated, they ascribed it to divine interposition on their behalf. If an unusual dream occurred, they gave it special significance. If they experienced exceptional joy or grief, they expressed it in dramatic action. Their prophets taught in parables—like the story of the pet lamb which Nathan told to David. They illustrated and enforced their teachings by dramatic action. "Zedekiah made him horns of iron, and said, Thus saith Jehovah, With these shalt thou push the Syrians until they be consumed." "Ahijah rent his garment in twelve pieces, and said to Jereboam, Take thee ten pieces, for thus saith Jehovah, Behold I will rend the kingdom out of the hand of Solomon, and will give ten tribes to thee." Ezekiel set an iron pan as a wall of a city and lay on his side before it to show a state of siege of Jerusalem.

Given such a people, if God were to reveal himself at all, what is more natural than that he should reveal himself through such external methods as would arrest their attention and through such intellectual concepts on their part as would make known his will. God himself, in his essence, could not be revealed or perceived. What they saw, at last, through all signs of whatever nature, was holiness, power, justice, mercy, grace; and these were the qualities which, at length, gave to them Jehovah.

On a beautiful Sunday in March, a few years since, I sat on the veranda of a hotel, once a palace of the khedive of Egypt, on the west bank of the Nile opposite Cairo. The veranda overlooked the gardens of the palace. Into these grounds came a strolling magician and stopped in front of the veranda. He had a small donkey, a large

monkey, and a great snake which he carried in a leather pouch. After various performances he took the snake and breathed into its mouth, and immediately the snake stiffened, stretched itself to its extreme length, and became rigid like a rod. Later the magician took the snake by the tail and it grew lax, recovered its flexible movements, and became a live snake again. Here evidently was a descendent of Jannes who withstood Moses, and who has succeeded to the knowledge and skill which gave the old magicians their power over the people. Into the details of "the signs and wonders wrought in Egypt" I do not propose to enter. Many a western man of scientific habit of mind would look for secondary or natural causes whereby to account for them. It may be well, however, to recall the fact that to the man who believes in God, back of all so-called natural causes is the supreme cause which is the divine will. Whether an event happens at a given time as a coincidence or by immediate divine volition, it may work his will and make himself known. Personally, I have no difficulty in believing in miracles when the end justifies them. If any man can satisfactorily explain them as coincidences, that will not eliminate their value to the people who regarded them as direct results of the divine will. The magician of the present has been introduced simply to call attention to this fact. Given a people under the hallucination of magic, a people who believed that the magician held communication with the world of spirits, a people who regarded the wonder-worker as an accredited teacher of the divine will; how could a man like Moses break the bondage of such superstition, deliver men from such error and awaken faith in Jehovah, his God, better than by such a course of procedure as would show greater works and compel the people to exclaim: "This is the finger of God?" If it should be said that this is to place Moses on a level with the magicians, it will be sufficient to observe that, if Moses had stopped with "signs," if he had no higher power and no better truth for men, this would be true. But, if the use of "signs" served to arrest attention, to secure a hearing, to discountenance the methods and the theology of the magicians, and, finally, to lead to a worship which was divorced from idolatry and to a law of truth justified by moral results, then the end justified the means. "The plagues of Egypt" led Israel to accept Moses as a divinely appointed teacher,

and to believe in the presence, power, and purpose of Jehovah respecting them. And what is true here is true, generally, of the biblical history. After all due allowance is made for the interpretation of past events by the conceptions of the writers of the biblical records, it is impossible to deny their claim that God spoke to men in times past in many ways determined by their needs, to which, in his merciful and gracious revelation of himself, he conformed. To deny to God the freedom and the power to speak to men, through nature as well as through mind, "out of the whirlwind" and in "the flame," by "vision" and by "voice," by physical manifestation and by spiritual inspiration is to deny to God, so it seems, the freedom and the power which belongs to man, who, without destroying a single physical law, is continually interposing in nature to make those laws combine to work his will, and who, without laying aside his dignity as a father, is continually humbling himself in action and in speech to teach his child.

A modern man of scientific habit of thought, and without any Bible or knowledge of one, standing alone amid the silence and the sublimity of some lofty mountain, might be impressed by the power which has produced it and might descend to speak reverently of the invisible power which, existing prior to the mountains, had brought them forth; and his message would have both meaning and worth. But that ancient, unscientific man, Moses, who stood alone amid the silence and the sublimities of the mountains until he saw a vision and heard a voice (how? who can tell?) and who came down from the mountain to proclaim his message—"The name of Jehovah," "A God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abundant in loving-kindness and truth, keeping loving-kindness for thousands, forgiving iniquity; and transgressing and sin"—received a revelation of God and gave to men a message sorely needed by the sinning, sorrowing, suffering sons of men.

The prophets were men of like passions with other men and beset by limitations. But, by physical phenomena commonly regarded as miraculous, by psychological experiences described as visions and ecstasies, they received and uttered truth concerning God. And this plain and historic truth must be recognized that, beginning as part of the Semitic people, Israel became differentiated, and, though subject to

kindred customs, out of the spiritual impressions which came through physical phenomena and the teachings of the prophets, their conception of God clarified until Jehovah became superior, supreme, the sole Deity whom they knew through the revelation of his attributes of holiness, power, justice, mercy, and truth. Their ceremonies have no value for modern times, and their history—apart from its religious import—is of little worth; but the truth concerning God which they made known is dear to the hearts of men, and the world would be loath to lose it. The “wisdom literature” may not be much read by the multitudes, but the psalms of Israel, like the waves of the universal sea which break on every shore, speak to the hearts of men in all lands.

Jesus recognized the necessity of conforming to the needs of men in his methods of teaching. He would be a bold man who would deny, or an audacious man who would seek to explain, the works of Jesus as he healed and helped the people. Jesus said to the Jews: “Though ye believe not me, believe the works: that ye may know and understand that the Father is in me.” Jesus said to the messengers from the Baptist: “Go and tell John the things which ye hear and see: the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear.” That the men who gathered at the door in Capernaum might “know that the Son of man hath authority on earth to forgive sins, he saith to the sick of the palsy, Arise and take up thy bed and walk.”

But to those who had received the lower revelations through “signs,” and to whom the higher revelation of spiritual righteousness ought to have been apparent, but who turned from it still demanding a “sign from heaven,” Jesus turned away saying: “A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign.” Jesus taught the transient purpose of all language, and demanded acceptance of the truth itself in faith in the eternal love and grace which he revealed. And to those who receive him no other method but that of the truth and the Spirit are now needed. Much that is of value has come out of past methods; but they were for the times. Jesus—the very truth of God—is for all times. The divine voice has spoken and has said to men: “Not Moses with his law, not Elijah with his judgment, but my beloved Son, full of grace and truth shall ye hear.”

The perception of this method of revelation, and the acceptance of the progressive principle of divine communication which completes itself in a knowledge of spiritual reality apart from its medium, is of great practical value. It will save men from that bondage to the letter, which killeth, and will give that liberty of the spirit, which finds life. It will deliver from the danger of looking on the modern wonder-worker—even though he heals—as being necessarily an accredited teacher of divine truth. It will keep men from that ignorant spirit which would turn from the spiritual truth of God and demand a sign from heaven. It will enable men to live by the spirit now, without denying that men in past times needed and received ministrations through the senses. In short, it will keep men, on the one hand, from that superstitious spirit which “seeks after a sign” and which ever exposes its subjects to the danger of becoming “a wicked and adulterous generation,” seeking God by sense; and, on the other hand, it will keep them from that skeptical spirit which rejects all forms unnecessary now, and which is always exposed to the danger, not simply of denying the forms, but also of denying the spirit veiled beneath those forms, thereby denying the truth of God. Men who hold to this principle of interpretation will not attempt to force the exactitude of scientific statement into the poetical and pictorial symbolism of another race and time, and they will find that knowledge of the truth of God and will grow in that experience of the grace of Christ which will fulfil his desire in them. For he has said: “This is life eternal, that they should know thee, the only true God, and him whom thou didst send, even Jesus Christ.”